Re-contextualising Artworks

An excerpt from:

The Role of Memory and Perception in Attaching Meaning to Photography

Richard Gosnold, 2016

Transforming the personal experience of one's mind into something that is visually accessible to others may prove burdensome and, thus, the intentions of the photographer may not always dictate how the meaning of the photograph is deciphered. Therefore, we must consider how the viewer interacts with the image and reconstructs it so that it fits into place within the world that they know.

John Berger wrote, *"We never look at just one thing; we are always looking at the relation between things and ourselves"*. He implies, when we read visual art we are relating what we see with our own personal experience and by doing so we are re-contextualising work that the author has made so that it fits within our own personal narrative. Put simply, we see what we want to see based on what we know and how we expect the world to be.

Art historian, Alois Riegl, explored the psychology of perception and is credited with encouraging a dialogue between art history and psychology. Eric Kandel writes about how Riegl *"discovered a new psychological aspect of art"* and along with two *"younger disciples"*, Ernst Kris and Ernst Gombrich, he considered the viewer to be a fundamental aspect in a work of art:

> *"… these three focused on the beholder's response to a work of art and thereby laid a foundation for the emergence of a holistic, cognitive psychology of art that was substantially deeper and more rigorous than the dialogue Freud had attempted."* (Kandel, 2012 p.186)

Riegl also wrote, *"Art is incomplete without the perceptual and emotional involvement of the viewer"* and coined the term, 'the beholder's involvement'

Therefore, a work of visual art is a collaboration between the viewer and the artist, as the viewer interprets the scene and imparts his or her personal experience to add meaning to a picture and, by doing so, he or she effectively transforms a two-dimensional picture, an illusion of the visual world, into a three-dimensional depiction of how he or she sees the world.

Kandel writes about how Ernst Kris and Ernst Gombrich added to the conversation around art criticism and 'the beholder's involvement' by considering the link between emotional response and visual perception. Rudolf Arnheim, a Gestalt psychologist, also wrote about this major change many years later:

> *"With the turn towards psychology, the theory of art began to take cognizance of the difference between the physical world and its appearance, and, subsequently, of the further difference between what is seen in nature and what is recorded in an artistic medium… What is seen*

depends on who is looking and who taught him to look." (Arnheim, 1962)

Therefore, we re-contextualize the work of art by bringing something of ourselves to it. However, this theory assumes that we can relate a personal experience to something within the image and raises the question: how can we attach meaning to an image with which we have no relation and a subject matter of which we have no experience or is perhaps more ambiguous?

Art Historian, Ernst Kris, became interested in psychology, trained as a psychoanalyst and worked closely with Sigmund Freud. Freud persuaded Kris to combine his knowledge of art history and psychology to study the perceptual processes of both the artist and viewer.

Kandel:

> *"Kris argued that when an artist produces a powerful image out of his of her life experiences and conflicts, that image is inherently ambiguous. The ambiguity in the image elicits both a conscious and unconscious process of recognition in the viewer, who responds emotionally and empathically to the image in terms of his or her own struggles. Thus, just as the artist creates a work or art, so the viewer re-creates it by responding to its inherent ambiguity. The extent of the beholder's contribution depends on the degree of ambiguity in the work of art."* (Kandel, 2012 pp.191-192)

Interestingly, Kris is arguing that by creating work that is ambiguous, the artist is able to elicit a response from the viewer who has a different set of experiences and prompt them to tap into their own feelings and emotions to attach meaning to the work. Art historian, Wilhelm Worringer, discusses ambiguity in visual art and Kandel draws attention to his essay entitled, 'Abstraction and Empathy: A Contribution to the Psychology of Style':

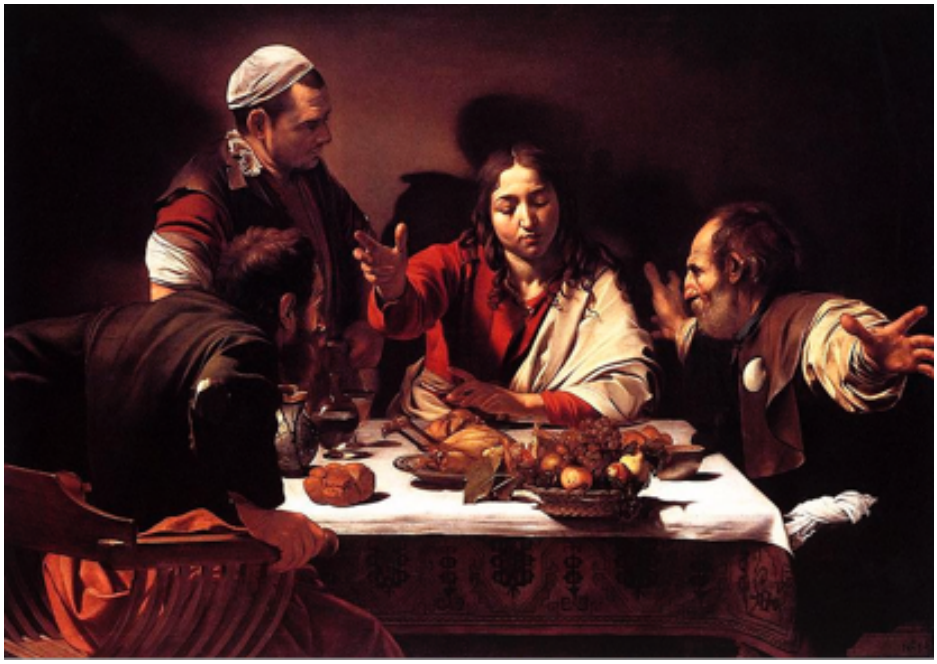
> *"Worringer argues that two sensitivities are required of the viewer: empathy, which allows the viewer to lose himself or herself in a painting and be at one with the subject, and abstraction, which allows the viewer to retreat from the complexities of the everyday world and follow the symbolic language of the forms and colors in a painting."* (Kandel, 2012 .192).

Therefore, one may assume that the viewer does not need to know about the subject matter and draws upon subconscious thought processes to attach meaning to an image. Furthermore, this may be a different meaning to that intended by the author.

In his television series, 'Ways of Seeing', John Berger refers to how children relate all images directly to their own experiences and interpret them accordingly. He spoke with a group of children about a Caravaggio painting, 'Supper at Emmaus' and asked them to interpret what they saw.

Berger comments:

> *"Because they were really looking and really relating what they saw to their own experience, they recognized something that most adults wouldn't... Without knowing the artist's name, let alone anything about Caravaggio's life, or the fact that he was homosexual, they immediately saw how sexually ambivalent the principal figure was."* (Berger, 1972)



Caravaggio, 'Supper at Emmaus', 601.

Berger suggests that the children knew nothing about Caravaggio and had no other knowledge about the context in which the painting was made that would influence their interpretation of the scene. Thus, they could not contextualize the picture with anything other than their own experiences and some of them were able to relate to the scene. Interestingly, one of the children thought that the character at the centre of the scene might be Jesus. One may speculate as to exactly why the child thought it was Jesus. He mentioned that the character looked like a leader and it is possible that he had seen paintings of Christ before, however, the depiction in this painting shows Jesus without a beard and that is

unusual. Therefore, there was something that made him associate aspects withinthe picture with his own understanding of the scene however, not all of the children shared his opinion. Another child thought that the figure was not Jesus because there was no bread or wine on the table. Therefore, the image did not fit with his experience of seeing pictures of Christ.

Professor, M.D. Vernon (1971) writes that if children are often exposed to images with similar content they are able to recognize specific objects with which they have become familiar. Vernon refers to the Terman-Merrill test of intelligence and states that as a child reaches seven years old, s/he can identify more objects within a picture and can, thus, explain with greater detail the obvious activities within the image. However, if a picture is more ambiguous and suggests something that is not actually depicted, s/he will not be able to attach meaning to it until s/he reaches eleven years old.

Vernon describes how young children attach meaning to images:

> *"… younger children do not always notice those items in a picture which appear to us to be important and central to the incidents depicted. They may ignore them, and yet notice relatively unimportant details. For instance, in a picture used by the author of a fight, beer spilt from a broken bottle on to the floor was one of the items most frequently mentioned by children of nine or ten, though this item was not of any particular importance to the main subject of the picture".* (Vernon, 1971 p.95)

Vernon was commenting on the use of 'visual aids' in schools and she believed that children could be confused by pictures depicting scenes with which they were unfamiliar, for example, images of people living in foreign countries, and that these images may not be effectively understood by children younger than eleven:

> *"The children may be confused by the unfamiliar costumes and settings, and have no more than the vaguest notion of what the people are like or what they are doing."* (Vernon, 1971 p.96)

It should be noted that, Vernon wrote this text in 1971 and children today have far greater access to world events than they did in 1971 and, therefore, perhaps a wider exposure to other environments outside of their own. However, Vernon continued: "… the children may notice only things which are familiar and comprehensible to them".[2] This is an interesting point that may be relevant when

we interpret meaning in photographs today as we all have different experiences. James E. Cutting (2006) conducted research on a phenomenon called 'mere exposure', which is related to implicit learning. Cutting writes that we are exposed to countless images throughout life but do not remember them. However, a trace of the image remains with us unconsciously and this can affect our aesthetic preferences in the future (see appendix 2).

Roland Barthes argues that photographs are polysemic, conveying multiple meanings, and I will posit that individuals attach different meanings to the same image. However, John A Walker employed a term, 'the ideology of individualism' to describe how a number of his students believed that:

> *"individuals are unique therefore everyone is different, therefore everyone interprets images differently, therefore one cannot speak about the meaning of an image; there are as many meanings as there are human beings."* (Walker, 1997 p.52)

Therefore, one image may have as many as seven billion meanings, one for each individual on earth, and thus becomes meaningless. I would argue that an image does indeed carry a multitude of meanings and how the meaning is deciphered, depends upon the type of image, the context in which it is seen and the life experience of the viewer. Naturally, as we have discussed, text may help to make the meaning of an image more accessible but the text will be the viewpoint of the writer and thus biased. Therefore, we should also consider the viewer's reaction to photographs that provide little or no context.

Deadpan Photography

We may consider the emotional detachment of the 'deadpan' aesthetic as an example of the artist stripping away sentimental and subjective elements from the scene, thus forcing the viewer to delve deep into his or her own psyche in order to attribute some meaning to the image for we have no indication of the artist's emotions to guide us.

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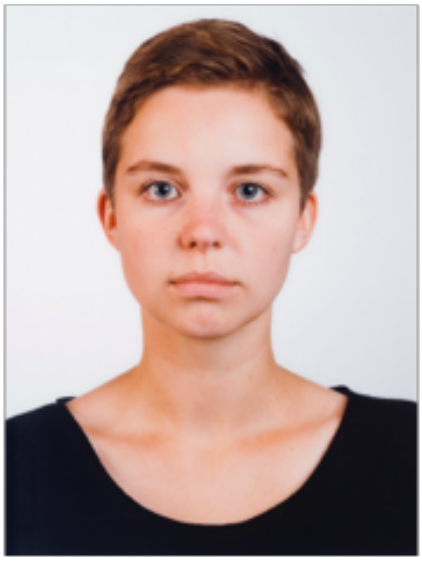
[2] Vernon states that the teacher should explain what is happening in the images to the children and encourage them to talk about them so that they can understand the content. (Vernon, 1971 P.96.)

Thomas Ruff started to make deadpan portraits of his friends in the late 1970s and these images can be likened to passport photographs, although Ruff's prints are substantially bigger. For example, the images that follow are printed around 200cm by 150cm.

Thomas Ruff, 'Portrait (S. Weirauch)', 1988.



Thomas Ruff, 'Portrait (I. Graw)', 1988.

Thomas Ruff, 'Portrait (Stoya)', 1986.

Thomas Ruff, 'Portrait (M. Roeser)', 1999.

There is little context offered in the images, except for the clothing worn by each sitter and the subjects, by remaining expressionless, are stripped of emotion. The subjects look "ordinary" because they are not stunningly beautiful or ugly and the lighting is flat and shadow-less. Thus, the lack of visual triggers leaves the viewer with complete control over how each person is perceived and this mechanical and minimalistic style is perhaps

photography in its most pure form. The photographs may be interpreted as portraits of the person looking at them as they tell the viewer more about themselves than the subjects who are posing for the photographs.

Charlotte Cotton writes:

> *"He experiments with the way we understand a subject because of our knowledge or expectation of how it is represented pictorially."* (Cotton, 2009 p.105)

> *"… the works' blank expressions and lack of visual triggers, such as gesture, confound our expectations of discovering a person's character through their appearance."* (Cotton, 2009 p.105-106)

The viewer has no reason to add a personality to the subject, other than drawing from their inner self, and one could refer to what William Kentridge says about his own art when trying to understand Ruff's 'Deadpan Portraits':

> *"It's about the combination between what comes to me from the picture and what I project onto it from my own history, memories, prejudice, readings and rationality".* (Kentridge, 2014)

Furthermore, Eric Kandel draws our attention to the German physician and physicist, Hermann von Helmholtz. Helmholtz studied visual perception but it was his earlier studies involving tactile perception that caused him to propose that the brain unconsciously processed a great amount of sensory information.

> *"He (Helmholtz) argued that information is routed to and processed at different sites in the brain during perception and during voluntary movement. When Helmholtz turned his attention to the study of vision, he realized that any static, two-dimensional image contains poor-quality, incomplete information. To reconstruct the dynamic, three-dimensional world from which the image was formed, the brain needs additional information. In fact, if the brain relied solely on the information it receives from the eyes, vision would be impossible. He therefore concluded that perception must also be based on a process of guessing and hypotheses testing in the brain, based on past experiences. Such educated guessing allows us to infer on the basis of past experience what an image represents."* (Kandel, 2011 p.203)

Helmholtz referred to this as 'unconscious inference' whereby, based on information from our senses, our brain has to infer what an object might be. Chris Frith, a cognitive psychologist, adds to Helmholtz's insight: *"We do not have direct access to the physical world. It may feel as if we have direct access, but this is an illusion created by our brain."* (Frith, 2007 p.40)

Research from neuroscientist Tom Albright compliments Helmholtz's argument. Albright speaks of contextual clues to visual perception and refers to the 'inverse problem of optics', in which he discusses the unreliability of the brain in terms of context and visual processing. He describes a fundamental problem of vision:

> *"…Images are projected onto to the back surface of the eye and from that image the brain tries to infer the causes of that image… there is not enough information in that image to reliably reconstruct what's out there in the world and yet we do it most of the time… every now and then we fail and call those illusions… The only way that we can get round this 'inverse problem of optics' is by including additional sources of information."*[4]

Albright refers to local context, "the other stuff that happens to be in the image at the same time". For example, if we see a picture of a car that is partially obstructed by another object, we can fairly reliably infer where the car extends past that object. Therefore, we can draw conclusions about things in our environment in the absence of direct information based on inferences from other sources of information.

Another source of context is prior experience, where we draw upon what we have learnt and use that information to develop hypotheses about the world. Often we see things and there is not enough information or the image is incomplete and we automatically fill in the blanks based on what is most likely to be happening by referring to our prior experiences with the world. Albright describes this as a "best guess" and this is how people may construct visual illusions. This theory can be related to visual art, which provides an impression or spark that may trigger a memory and cause the viewer to project their experiences of the world onto an image and subsequently see an image that is unique to him or her. Therefore, the things that we see are not defined solely by what is on one's retina but also by memory and what we know to be true.

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[4] Taken from The Science Network interview by Roger Bingham with Tom Albright http://thesciencenetwork.org/programs/the---science---studio/perception---and---the---beholder---s---share